

VZCZCXRO4960
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHAS #0034/01 0121845
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 121845Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6849
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0835
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3003

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000034

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: ALGERIA ALLOWS PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS OVER GAZA

REF: A. ALGIERS 18
[1](#)B. ALGIERS 31
[1](#)C. 08 ALGIERS 984
[1](#)D. 08 ALGIERS 661

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Bowing to growing public pressure (ref A), the Algerian government allowed protests in the streets of Algiers and other cities January 9 for the first time since 2001 so Algerians could show public support for the Palestinians in Gaza. Thousands participated in demonstrations around Algiers, and thousands more rallied in other cities throughout the country on January 9 and the following two days. Most demonstrations, only loosely organized and watched closely by police, took on a somber tone, with occasional scuffles with police on the margins. Routes to the U.S. and Egyptian embassies were closed and tightly guarded by riot police on January 9. Government and party leaders have begun speaking more vehemently against Israeli actions, but President Bouteflika has yet to make a public statement. We have seen little overt anti-American sentiment to date, but a statement published in Arabic-language newspapers urged academics to avoid contact with the U.S. Embassy, and university leaders in Constantine advised our PAO to avoid meeting with students during an upcoming visit. The government decided to allow the people to let off some steam related to Gaza, and the effort seems to have been somewhat effective. Mainstream political parties and various Islamists are now trying to turn public sympathy for the plight of Gazans to their advantage, but the effort is not without risk. END SUMMARY.

A RARE TASTE OF FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

[1](#)2. (C) Government news outlets announced January 8 that political parties could organize public demonstrations the following day after Friday prayers. This marked the first official sanctioning of public demonstrations since massive pro-Berber protests flooded the streets of Algiers in 2001, provoking a harsh reaction from security forces in what has come to be known as the Black Spring (ref C). Earlier in the week, the Ministry of Religious Affairs encouraged mosque leaders to focus sermons on the Gaza situation. While many sermons on January 9 were tempered, focusing on the plight of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, others contained angry diatribes against Israel, but we have no reports of overt anti-American sentiment.

[1](#)3. (C) After prayers, demonstrations and some limited marches occurred in several locations around Algiers, under the close watch of the police who mobilized riot units and gear strategically throughout the city. Our staff and contacts who witnessed or participated in the marches reported that most events were only loosely organized by elements of political parties or pro-Palestinian movements, and the tone of the rallies were generally somber, focusing not on political questions but on the plight of Palestinian

civilians caught up in the Gaza violence. Similar demonstrations took place in several other large Algerian cities on Friday, and in more cities throughout the country on Saturday and Sunday. Estimates vary widely, but at least 10,000 (and perhaps as many as 50,000) people are thought to have taken part in the various demonstrations in Algiers, and crowds ranging from hundreds to more than 10,000 were reported in other cities each day following.

WITH A DOSE OF POLICE-STATE REALITY

14. (C) In advance of the January 9 demonstrations in Algiers, routes to the Embassy were blocked and riot police were deployed in significant numbers in the area. No clashes with police were reported, but police did detain a few dozen demonstrators who refused to disperse in the early evening. Clashes did erupt at the margins of several larger demonstrations in Algiers. 50 demonstrators and 30 police were reported injured in a clash in the Kouba district, and nearly 200 people were reported arrested across the city. The government is making it clear that while demonstrations were tolerated, rioting was not -- 25 protesters the government said were caught on CCTV causing property damage were brought to trial within three days of their arrest. It also seems that the window for demonstrations is not open permanently. Algiers police told us informally on January 11 that they had been instructed to disperse, from that day on, any crowd of more than 10 people.

SOLIDARITY WITH GAZANS

ALGIERS 00000034 002 OF 003

15. (C) Our staff and contacts report that in general the demonstrations focused on showing solidarity with the Palestinians of Gaza, with a pervasive sense that governments throughout the region, including here, had abandoned them. Government leaders did not address crowds, nor did many recognizable party leaders or other celebrities. A 30-year-old unemployed man told us that no women were seen at the march he attended in downtown Algiers, and the crowd was mostly young. He estimated that 300 demonstrators marched from several area mosques to gather with other marchers at May 1st Square in central Algiers. He had never heard of the Gaza support group that the leader of his march claimed to be affiliated with, but the man pleaded with marchers to avoid violence and property destruction. He said that police threw up metal crowd control fences at several points along the route, but these were cast aside by marchers who continued on their way to the square. Demonstrators chanted mostly pro-Palestinian mantras, such as "What a shame, what a shame, they sold Gaza for dollars," using an Arabic-language play on the words "shame" and "dollar" which have the same ending and thus created a rhyme.

16. (C) At May 1st Square, where demonstrators from several parts of the city gathered, activities became more volatile. Our contact said he saw demonstrators burning the Israeli flag and chanting insults against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Ali Benhadj, former vice president of the outlawed Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), attended the rally at the square but was arrested, our contact said, for insulting the state (ref B). Other observers said Benhadj was arrested after he tried to address the crowd. A flight attendant for Air Algerie who also marched on the square told us he rallied his friends to march after they originally hesitated going out in the rain. He expressed disappointment that the message of solidarity with the people of Gaza got mixed with domestic ideology, telling us, "it was a pity we had to march for the cause of the children of Gaza, and at the same time for the cause of Ali Benhadj." One of our staff attended a rally in the upscale El Biar neighborhood where the Embassy is located, and described the mood as "profoundly sad," where even the police deployed to contain the marchers appeared

conflicted by their official duty and their sympathy for the Gazans. She noted that most of the women present wore veils, and that only a few clashes occurred when protesters taunted the police or openly ridiculed the Algerian government.

17. (C) A contact in the eastern city of Batna told us that she attended demonstrations there on Saturday, which she described as "really spectacular." She agreed with press estimates that as many as 30,000 people may have massed in Batna, including some from neighboring towns and outlying areas. She noted that the crowd was mostly young and that many students from the city of Khenchela were mobilized for the marches. Demonstrations took place on Sunday in Annaba to the east, Tizi Ouzou in the Kabylie, and Tlemcen in the west, with crowds reported as high as 15,000.

SLOWLY TURNING UGLY

18. (C) While most Algerians merely sympathize with Palestinian civilians in Gaza, and harbor some level of animosity toward the perceived lack of will to help them shown by Arab governments throughout the region, public rhetoric has been heating up. Press headlines are freely using the terms "massacre" and "genocide" to describe Israeli actions in Gaza. On January 11, former prime minister and head of the ruling FLN party Abdelaziz Belkhadem marched with the Palestinian ambassador and denounced the UN Security Council's efforts regarding the "genocide being perpetrated daily on Palestinian land in the occupied territories of Gaza." He was quoted in the press, referring to the UNSC, as saying, "You are not our intermediaries, and we are not merely observers. We are in the Palestinian camp." Vocal support for the Palestinian cause in Gaza exists not only in the universities and among the Algerian youth; shops in the Hydra district that is home to many in Algeria's ruling elite have recently hung signs in their storefronts that read, "We are Gazans."

19. (C) We are starting to feel the pinch of the Algerian anger toward Israel. A letter allegedly written by a group of professors at the University of Algiers to the Ambassador was published in at least two Arabic-language daily papers on January 11 (as of this writing, we have not actually received the purported letter). The letter linked American military aid to Israel to the "extermination war" being conducted by Israeli Defense Forces, and called on "all members of the academic profession to boycott all activities of the American Embassy in Algiers." On January 12, a political section FSN

ALGIERS 00000034 003 OF 003

who attended a forum on the Obama presidency was rebuffed when he tried to pass his business card to a professor to whom he was introduced at a tea ceremony with the forum's organizers. The professor returned his card during introductions saying that he preferred not dealing with Americans, and particularly not the U.S. Embassy. On a similar note, our Public Affairs Officer was told by rectors of two Algerian universities in Constantine that he should not attempt to meet as usual with students during an upcoming visit to the city, because the meetings would likely turn heated and would focus on the situation in Gaza.

COMMENT: PLAYING WITH FIRE

110. (C) By permitting demonstrations for the first time in almost a decade, the Algerian government appears to have made a calculated move to allow the people to let off some steam. The effort was relatively effective, as violence was minimal compared to the riots of 2008 that erupted from general civic malaise, ethnic tensions, or even soccer matches (ref D). Algerians are venting their anger not only against what they see as a humanitarian disaster in Gaza, but also against an apathy exhibited both by governments in the region and by their own. Mainstream political parties have started trying

to get out in front of the rallies in an attempt to rebuild a constituent base lost during their years in a government seen as distant and unresponsive. Various Islamists are also seeking to take advantage of the Algerian angst over Gaza: the French-language daily *Liberte* reported that Islamist slogans were heard chanted in the streets of the Kabylie capital Tizi Ouzou -- never an Islamist stronghold -- during a march the paper said was organized by students with the assistance of the ruling FLN party.

¶11. (C) These calculated efforts on the part of the government and the political parties to tap into the stream of popular emotion and harness it to their advantage come with not a little risk. The major country-wide riots that shook Algeria in 1988 and 2001 were both preceded by similar attempts by politicians to get out ahead of the protesting masses, as if to lead them. In both instances the efforts failed, leading to widespread social and political upheaval. If the situation in Gaza drags on and the Algerian people remain unconvinced that regional leaders are taking it seriously, the political elite stepping out in front of the crowds could end up being trampled by them.

PEARCE